The "Mayan" Train: Mexico’s latest industrial expansion renewed

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Abstract

Mexico’s president Lopez Obrador launched four major industrial projects as a part of his so-called fourth transformation, promoted as a turning point after decades of structural reforms and an export based economy. A new oil refinery and metropolitan airport and two trains that connect southeastern Mexico with the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans are currently underway. However, these projects did not steer away from Mexico’s violent history of dispossession, land grabbing, racism and corruption. The Mayan Train is a major urban and land development project spearheaded as a railway; it renews the hopes of agro, industrial, real estate and tourist industry tycoons of connecting the regional economy to international markets and the Gulf of Mexico. Such aspirations date back to Yucatan’s hacienda period known for enslaving the Mayan people in henequen plantations. As cities sprawl beyond a sustainable future and the delicate karstic aquifer is progressively polluted by industrial and urban expansion, this project threatens the livelihood of the peninsula and the hopes of a more just future for urban and rural populations alike.

I. THE YUCATAN PENINSULA AND MEXICO’S NATIVE PEOPLE

The Yucatan Peninsula is located in Mexico’s southeastern boundary to the Atlantic Ocean. The peninsula is part of the Gulf of Mexico’s continental coastline which spans 5,500 km wide from Florida all the way down to the Mexican Caribbean, home to many tourist attractions known to American and European travelers: Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Isla Mujeres, Holbox, Tulum, etc. South of the Peninsula lies a portion of the border between Belize, Guatemala and Mexico.

The Gulf Mexico has been described as the "American Mediterranean" as it simultaneously connects and divides the global North and South. It is also one of the busiest maritime commercial corridors of the planet. Commodities such as henequen, cocoa and precious woods have flowed from this region to world markets since colonial times, taking advantage of several oceanic currents, from the continent to Europe. Silver, gold, and crops have sailed the Gulf for centuries, fueling the birth of modern industrial capitalism in western Europe. Unlike its colonial counterparts, such as India and Africa, Mexico is characterized by its close proximity to an economic hegemonic power, the United States. Both countries share a colossal 2,805 km land border as well as the largest gulf on Earth.

The history of the Yucatan Peninsula cannot be understood without the history of the Gulf of Mexico. This history and oceans, it encompasses one of the largest watersheds in the world: the Mississippi-Missouri river basin. The Mississippi-Missouri river system begins in the Midwest and flows across the country to Louisiana where it discharges into the Gulf of Mexico. It help forge the United States as an economic power as it provided a navigable waterway into the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico as well as copious amounts of water for very fertile lands in the Great Plains. The United States was able to move ore from the rust belt into other states via the Mississippi and moved tons of crops and food inward and outwards. In reality the economic backbone of the country was laid down by a river system much before the railway connected the nation.

During the 19th century, both countries disputed over portions of land and Mexico lost 50% of its territory to the United States in one of history’s most egregious cases of land grabbing. Mexico’s volatile road to independence...
was also achieved during this period and attempts at a national project to unite a divided country began, only to be thwarted by coups and challenged by frequent revolts and a revolution during the early 20th century. However, the Yucatan Peninsula was relatively detached from the rest of Mexico, the lack of roads and accesses to the peninsula and a thick jungle cut by two mountain ranges, kept the peninsula mostly isolated from the rest of the country. In fact, the peninsula sought to secede from Mexico in two separate occasions in order to preserve its economic privileges and a caste system which currently endures. Mirroring closely southern American states during the Civil War, Yucatan’s mostly white plantation owners enslaved Mayan communities in the henequen fields, used to manufacture fibers during this period, and were threatened by the federal government’s agenda of a liberal state. Henequen production boomed during the prewar period before the expansion of oil-based plastic fibers, and white plantation owners envisioned a fully integrated regional economy to international markets which were picking up on new ventures ignited by conflict between imperial nations. However, henequen’s prosperity was short-lived as chemical and oil products began to power energy hungry industries and replace raw materials with cheaper inputs like plastic. Even as henequen’s place in the market dwindled the plantations perpetuated slavery and castes well through the 20th century. The hacienda system of oppression gave birth to multiple uprisings in Mexico and particularly in Yucatan, where the “War of Castes” (Guerra de Castas) erupted in 1847, around the time when Mexico was at war with the U.S. disputing nearly half of its territory.

The multiple Mayan uprisings challenged the economic and caste oppression brought upon them by mestizo and white landowners and allowed for an underground Mayan government divided into several republics within the peninsula’s thick tropical forests and jungles. Most of these lands claimed by the Mayan people remained undisputed until the 70’s when the state of Quintana Roo (famous for Cancún, Playa del Carmen, the island of Cozumel, among other tourist attractions) was formally created. As the War of Castes brought local capitalist’s dreams of a powerful export driven economy to an end, the federal government crushed the Mayan uprising in exchange for the peninsula’s compliance with a liberal economy and centralized government ruling from Mexico City. Mayans quickly fled to the jungles and remained independent for decades to come.

As a result, the city of Merida, the Peninsula’s current largest city and industrial hub, erected a wall enclosing the city in order to keep Mayans away from a predominantly white city. To this day the city is still referred to as ‘the white Merida’ (la Blanca Mérida); a name usually attributed to the city’s characteristic fair-colored limestone buildings; but in reality, it labeled the city as a safe-haven for white and mestizo people. Although the wall has mostly been torn down, one can still visit the well preserved remains of it in Merida’s downtown and take a look at the monument of Yucatan’s most infamous colonizer which rises above Merida’s emblematic Montejo avenue named after him, and that was once home to the Peninsula’s richest caste. Additionally, the Peninsula’s unofficial flag, which last stood during Yucatan’s unsuccessful independence attempt and which now displays in bumper stickers as chauvinistic and racially charged remnant of ancient landowners’ descendants, exhibits five stars symbolizing Yucatán’s former mostly white cities.

As Merida became the peninsula’s most important commercial hub and industrial city, connected to the rest of the nation through highways and railways, rural and predominantly Mayan communities were thrust into capitalism’s particular form of underdevelopment. Contrary to mainstream thought, underdevelopment is actively created and reproduced within and by capitalism as a means to transfer value from nations with copious amounts of natural resources to highly industrialized ones. Such dynamic has been explored in depth by some of Latin America’s
Marxist scholars (such as André Gunder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini, and Theotonio Dos Santos); their theories hold that structural poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure and unequal terms of trade among other nations is not due to their inability to ‘climb the ladder’ but to systemic conditions embedded in capitalist societies which enable industrialized and predominately white nations to flourish at the expense of former colonial nations with non-white populations. Furthermore, they claimed that many Latinamerican country’s attempts at forging a national industry were severely hindered during the 70’s and 80’s at the hands of neoliberal structural reforms, and the resulting economic and social restructuring failed to deliver on economists’ promises of “progress” and further sank urban workers, rural peasants and indigenous communities into a new spiral of underdevelopment and dependence.

Thus, despite the widespread ill-based narrative that glorifies industrial development as a solution to all social problems and which claims that because indigenous and rural populations are not part of modern capitalist society are destined to live in unequal and unfair conditions, when in fact their current situation is precisely because they are already part of a modern market-based society. So called development is deliberately selective and uneven, some regions ‘develop’ as underdeveloped while others turn into flourishing industrialized nations. However, one should not mistake current industrialized powers as a universal model other regions or countries should aspire to, for industrialization has brought forth striving and thriving nations whose populations have suffered at the expense of capitalist’s dogmatic belief in eternal growth.

Most former colonial nations have not be-
come highly industrialized white-like countries but have instead turned into export-driven economies, deeply dependent on international trade and foreign investment, and with remarkably permissive legal frameworks which have enabled and promoted land-grabbing, privatizing, looting and ransacking rather untouched territories, as well as rampant human rights violations. Mexico is a leading example of such pattern; the ‘maquila’ manufacturing system which broke down supply chains into smaller under-paid and overworked factories throughout the country were forced to supply a wider and more integrated export market. To this day Mexico’s exports to the US account for 80% of the country’s international trade.

This industrialization model, however, has had disastrous effects on Mexico’s environment and working peoples’ rights. Seven out of 10 rivers and water bodies are highly polluted, median wages are below a dollar an hour, Mexico has lost most of its pristine forests and jungles, and it has acquiesced to every unfair trade agreement with its northern neighbor. Both NAFTA and USMCA have positioned Mexico in clear disadvantage to Canada and the US; signed under pressure and unfair conditions, NAFTA crippled Mexican farmers, hindered rural development and gave rise to the Zapatista uprising in 1994. During that time, Mexico was undergoing a broad neoliberal restructuring of its public sector as a result of the 1982 debt crisis, caused by a sharp and deliberate hike in international interest rates, which in turn increased loan costs for Latin American countries indebted to the US. As a part of this restructuring, Mexico was dissolving and selling off its government owned businesses to private owners who were cashing in on resources and equity that only the government
could have amassed. This resulted in a new Mexican corporate class intimately linked to the US’s economic interests.

As the export driven economy spearheaded broader social reforms in Mexico, capitalists turned their business to another lucrative enterprise: tourism. During the 80’s Mexico’s government decided to leverage the nation’s coastline to gain access to other corporations. Cancun, once a small Caribbean fishing town was turned into a touristic region, which currently hosts 17 million tourists per year (10 times the size of Quintana Roo state’s population) and clusters 70% of the nation’s most popular destination hotel rooms. Fishermen and native Mayans who lived in the region were forced into a new form of slavery, working to please and accommodate mostly rich white European, American, and Canadian tourists. The ‘Riviera Maya’ was transformed into a set of large cities packed with big buildings and an urban landscape which appealed to American tourist culture: sun, sand, sea (and sex).

In the meantime, Mayans were deprived of their land and traditions and any possible future alternative use. This form of dispossession is rarely discussed, and the term is usually applied to only a form of property being withdrawn from one party and appropriated by another. However, dispossession can come even before any formal property rights have been established or formally recognized and can take place as a simple transfiguration of the way land and other commons were used. For instance, building a twenty-story hotel and displacing the local population denies them from the current possibility of using their land as it was used before; furthermore, any transformation of that space further denies previous usage over it, meaning future uses are potentially canceled as a result. This in turn has had devastating effects on the Mayan culture and legacy and its unique worldview and relationship with nature, endangering not only their livelihood but a complex knowledge of nature that could potentially be an alternative to human activities that have led to irreversible climate change and environmental degradation.

Mexican politicians have repeatedly launched their political campaigns on a platform of indigenous’ rights and rural development, which native people know all too well are meaningless and have meant the opposite for their communities. So called development of indigenous communities as sought by Mexican capitalists has actually meant uprooting communities from their ancestral lands and uses thereof. Although expressly stated in the Mexican constitution, indigenous autonomy has become one of the country’s many powerless legal provisions lacking real oversight, enforcement and, above all, genuine acknowledgment from the government and capitalists. In fact, this legal provision was incorporated as a result of the Zapatista movement’s demands —the largest indigenous uprising in modern Mexico— and was only partially granted after the Mexican government betrayed and violently repressed it. Until this day, the San Andres accords remain shelved and stored in a government file cabinet —dar carpetazo as usually referred to in Spanish—, and the whole set of demands which the Zapatistas still currently stand for was deliberately ignored by Mexican politicians.

After decades of a single-party system that went by the name PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the mostly conservative, religious and right wing party PAN (National Action Party) rose to power at the beginning of this century after almost 75 years of PRI dominance. This meant no substantial change to Mexico’s economic status quo but instead a further deepening of neoliberalism’s grip over all supply chains and territories. The PAN, evermore subservient to United States’ interests, sparked a new era of violence when the War on Drugs was formally signed in the city of Mérida. After nearly 14 years of escalating violence, nearly 300 thousand dead, 60 thousand missing and thousands of female victims (see Mexico’s Ciudad Juarez for example), Mexicans have yet to see a peaceful political and social transition in a country disputed by drug-trafficking car-
tels, human traffickers, corrupt and incompetent politicians and greedy capitalists. In 2018, however, an ostensibly leftist government was voted into power.

Lopez Obrador, Mexico’s current president, had previously run for office in two previous but fraud-ridden and controversial elections which respectively seized power for Felipe Calderon (PAN) and Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI). Without delving into much detail, Lopez Obrador was constantly portrayed as a “danger” to Mexico and a gateway to a ”communist” country. To many right-winger’s surprise Lopez Obrador and his party won every government body at the federal level and several at the state and municipal executive levels by a landslide. However, Lopez Obrador’s cabinet exhibited a divided array of politicians that had been in office during other controversial administrations, particularly the Ernesto Zedillo administration. This suggests that in order to actually be elected, Lopez Obrador had to concede and negotiate the reach of his executive power and limit the extent of his plans and his party’s majority in both floors of congress so as to reform the Constitution and pass laws to counteract nearly 30 years of neoliberal takeover.

López Obrador also ran on a platform of social justice and claimed he would uphold indigenous rights and the San Andres accords, which the Zapatistas dismissed as a Trojan horse to meddle in indigenous territories. These claims were backed by the fact that Esteban Moctezuma, current Secretary of Education, was actively involved during the Zedillo administration in the San Andres accords talks as Secretary of the Interior, and that the Secretary of Agriculture and Rural Development, Victor Villalobos, has acted as mouthpiece for Monstanto and GMOs in Mexico. Additionally, more radical cabinet members have been undermined and their attempts at a more progressive agenda undercut by other major industrial projects such as the “Mayan” Train. This internal split has become increasingly marked as some members of the cabinet have either resigned or caved into having their public statements drafted in accordance to the president’s rhetoric and their projects distorted by compromise.

This new government reenacted Mexico’s paternalistic approach to previously disenfranchised groups with a set of money transfers to the poor and social programs, and a romantic but condescending vision of indigenous communities that assumes capitalism’s profit gains are the only solution to poverty. Although Lopez Obrador has often publicly stated that development does not require growth, his and his cabinet’s actions brandish old school neoliberal tactics combined with half-baked Keynesian policies. To cite one example, Lopez Obrador’s austerity scheme of reducing government spending while broadening the budget for social programs by transferring resources from one department to another. This has deepened the government’s longstanding lack of capacity to fully integrate and coordinate with each other and which has led Mexican institutions to become a bloated and ineffective bureaucracy distant to the people’s needs. As Lopez Obrador had promised not to raise or create new taxes, austerity was not followed by a tax reform to expand revenue streams into the nation’s income in order to increase government spending in a more effective way.

In fact, this strategy has resulted in a questionable management of the COVID-19 pandemic; the government claimed a contact tracing approach —undertaken in countries that have fared better with controlling the disease’s spread— was beyond the country’s budget while spending 1.7 billion dollars (2020) in the Mayan Train’s first 200 miles, a fifth of a 1,000 mile projected route. To put things in perspective, a recent report by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health estimated that $3.6 billion would need to be appropriated by congress to fund such an endeavor in the United States, which almost doubles Mexico’s population. In a leaked audio, Victor Manuel Toledo, a longtime environmental activist and former Secretary of Environment lashed out at Lopez Obrador and other cabi-
net members, stating that Alfonso Romo, the president’s former chief of staff and closest capitalist adviser, and the Secretary of Agriculture had pressured him into accepting several controversial projects (such as granting permits for mass scale use of glyphosate in Mexican fields, which Toledo firmly opposed), and labeled Lopez Obrador’s government and political project as one of many contradictions and internal power struggles. After Toledo’s rooftop was sprayed with Monsanto’s RoundUp in retaliation to him banning it, he was pushed to resign from office.

The “Mayan” Train akin to many of the administration’s major projects has arisen from compromises with capitalists’ interests and is intended as bargaining chip in exchange for other key reforms. However, Lopez Obrador has repeatedly promoted the “Mayan” Train as a turning point for the Yucatan Peninsula and Mayan people and has claimed this project has effectively overcome old-style neoliberal infrastructure projects with a renewed social vision. Nevertheless, a finer review of the project and the way it is carried out reveals a far different picture.

II. THE “MAYAN” TRAIN PROJECT

The “Mayan” Train is one of four major industrial and infrastructure projects of Lopez Obrador’s so called fourth transformation. In an attempt to mimic the image of former influential and historically relevant presidential figures such as Benito Juarez, Mexico’s only indigenous president, and Lazaro Cárdenas who was responsible for expropriating the country’s oil from foreign capital, and the largest land redistribution and reform in Latin American history, Lopez Obrador has advertised his cabinet’s policies as a turning point in Mexican history analogous to those periods. However, his policies, after two years in office, have shown to be more akin to the neoliberal policies he has repeatedly claimed to oppose.

Three of these major projects are located in southeastern Mexico. An oil refinery in the state of Tabasco (known as "Dos Bocas"
project), an industrial cargo and manufacturing corridor in the Tehuantepc Isthmus and the “Mayan” Train project in the Yucatan Peninsula. All projects seek to industrialize and urbanize what Lopez Obrador and conventional demographic data have claimed as undeveloped, and tap into an immense amount of natural and geopolitical resources. The Yucatan Peninsula holds one of Mexico’s largest freshwater reservoirs and accesses to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. An American speleologist and environmentalist currently living in Akumal, once called the Peninsula’s mostly unexplored underground water flows the “Mexican Himalayas”. The "Mayan" Train resembles China’s "free zones" which were intended to connect tourism, agriculture and manufacturing via railways and highways. However, the "Mayan" Train far from boosting the national economy will primarily benefit foreign and national investors.

In December 2019, an illegitimate referendum was carried out to "inquire whether indigenous people favored the project". After an intense public relations campaign led by FONATUR (the National Tourism Fund), an array of projects and policies were subjected to a yes or nay vote by registered voters. As Lopez Obrador had won with widespread approval and his projects were greeted likewise, even destructive infrastructure projects such as an oil refinery and the Mayan Train had little to no public opposition. These projects were advertised as part of a national transformation project, and the image of a "Mayan" train that would supposedly favor underdeveloped communities slowly crept into the media. Many grassroots and academic organizations publicly came out against the project and have documented the many irregularities surrounding the project, including urban development, land grabbing and racism.

The project was entrusted to a government owned fund that was created under the Secretary of Tourism’s jurisdiction, the FONATUR (National Tourism Fund). In reality, this government fund is only entitled to build tourist infrastructure and advertise the coun-
try’s tourist attractions. However, as stated by the head of FONATUR, the Mayan Train is an urban development project designed to transport people and industrial and agricultural cargo around the peninsula while connecting it to foreign markets through the maritime port of Puerto Progreso, Yucatán, and Cancún. As the first outlines of the project became public, environmental activists, local organizations and academics realized the severity of such an endeavor. People within FONATUR have publicly stated that the Mayan Train aspires to be a project “as comprehensive” and broad as Cancún was in the 70’s and 80’s, which has seen its beaches covered by tall foreign-owned hotels, an unequal city and displacement of Mayan fishermen from their ancestral land and work. Such dispossession and environmental catastrophe are about to be repeated all over again at an even greater scale with Lopez Obrador’s “Mayan” Train project.

The project has been repeatedly advertised as an ‘ultimate solution’ to poverty and Mayan ‘underdevelopment’. Even before any construction took place, FONATUR was already claiming that not a single tree was to be cut down, Mayan peoples’ rights were to be upheld, and that this project differed substantially to the PRI’s old school corruption schemes and the PAN’s neoliberal land grabbing arrangements. However, these claims soon proved to be empty-worded. When the project began its outreach process in Mayan communities, its promoters handpicked communities whose authorities could easily be convinced into agreeing with the government’s new project. In fact, the Mexican government is required to consult indigenous communities on any activity it carries out in indigenous or ancestral lands as established in the International Labor Office’s Convention 169. The voting process was carried out in a handful of sympathetic communities and without fully informing people about the environmental and social risks this project entailed. FONATUR repeatedly stated that the risks were vastly overcompensated by the project’s benefits and they were not required to disclose such information; months after the indigenous consult and first in site constructions, and public backlash against the project’s irregularities, FONATUR was forced to submit an Environmental Impact Study, after it had initially been granted an unlawful submission exemption in November. According to Mexican law, this study needs to be conducted before any procedures, such as the indigenous consult, and construction begins.

FONATUR blatantly and cynically dismissed people’s concerns about the project’s impact on pollution, water availability and quality, land grabbing, urbanization, safety, drug and human trafficking and fair access to the project’s benefits. Furthermore, economic benefits are rarely traced back to neoclassical economics’ simplistic tenets, in which financial earnings are a “perfect substitute” —in Jevon’s words—to any other “good” or wrongdoing for that matter. The theoretical and ethical background of this assumption stems from the idea that individual ‘benefits’ add up to society’s benefit as a whole. Hence, if financial gains are larger than the social costs, then a project should be deemed as worthy and even necessary. However, this logic is flawed in many ways; first, because financial gains are privatized and costs are socialized; second, there is no actual equivalency between financial gains and environmental degradation, cultural uprooting, intergenerational injustices, and pollution. Supposing that the effects of concrete actions such as deforestation, construction, urbanization, land development, etc can be abstractly measured via prices will only perpetuate practices that have left new generations with irreparable damage.

This logic is widely applied to all government projects. The “Mayan” Train is no different. The profits and benefits for investors that will come as a direct result of the project are greater than advertised. In fact, an overarching land development program to restructure and integrate the Yucatan Peninsula to the global market is not new. Several attempts at massively privatizing and connecting Mayan territories to the Gulf of Mexico have been made. Having learned from the henequen period, investments have targeted Mayan territories and
natural resources, and altered traditional ways of organizing, living, collective work, and viewing nature by inserting highly technified and intrusive equipment far from the people’s grasp. The peninsula now hosts hundreds of solar panels and wind turbines within Mayan communities, which has entailed building electrical transfer lines to the main grid, claiming more land as they cut through jungles and farmlands.

Taking advantage of capitalism’s renewed greenwashing narrative, foreign energy companies have hopped on investments in renewable sources, such as wind and solar, while simultaneously lambasting environmental activists and Mayan communities for opposing ‘development’. Although these technologies’ carbon footprint is lower than that of fossil fuels, and an energy transition is long overdue, this talking point deliberately overlooks their social and environmental impacts. Under capitalism’s logic, impacts and so called benefits are equivalent and exchangeable by sheer value. Adding a price tag to environmental and social degradation diminishes people’s capacity to engage and take political and local actions into their own hands.

Imagine dozens of 200 meter tall wind turbines in a small farming town. It changes people’s relationship with nature, their natural and cultural landscape, and urban capitalism. This is a new form of colonialism that seeks to fully incorporate untapped lands into profit-led exploitation. A single wind turbine needs a 12 meter deep and 100 m² wide platform, in other words, 15 truck trailers would be required to haul the extracted soil. As of 2018, there were over 500 wind turbines underway in the peninsula alone. This land grabbing strategy was formalized under the banner of a sustainable agreement in the peninsula: The Yucatan Peninsula Sustainability Agreement (ASPY in Spanish). Far from its cynical attempt at greenwashing corporations’ environmental track record, this agreement fostered a land grabbing cooperation between 50 major corporations in cement, food and beverage, energy and other sectors. Even some NGOs came on board with the strategy, such as The Nature Conservancy. Activists and grassroots organizations quickly called the agreement the Yucatán Peninsula’s looting agreement.

The agreement was projected to spark investment in wind and solar farms, highly technified and industrialized agriculture, massive pig and poultry breeding farms that leach toxic waste into underground rivers, hybrid and GMO plantations, urban and industrial development, and tourist real estate. Furthermore, the peninsula was projected to become the next ‘Silicon Valley’, without even ever considering a comprehensive waste management plan. Underground water in the Yucatán Peninsula is relatively superficial and is highly susceptible to pollution; therefore, all modern human activities must be heavily regulated, reconfigured and adjusted to foster intergenerational justice and long-term planning.¹

Mérida was expected to become the keystone of such endeavor, connecting industry, agriculture, and tourism to the manufacturing, financial and political hub of the peninsula. The city has sprawled out since and has erected dozens of malls, real estate, housing and has deepened the existing inequalities intrinsic to capitalism. Urban expansion was also followed by a continued and expanding grasp of Meridian technocracy and right wing system of belief onto peasant and fishing communities in the state of Yucatán and Campeche, while this occurred in the state of Quintana Roo through Cancún’s influence in the region. Yucatan’s coastlines were soon filled with Meridian summer houses, drunken yuppies, and communities saw their streets crowded with tourists’ cars and waste. This in turn changed relationships among community members that shifted from more reciprocal cooperative relations to money-based transactions inspired by city folks’ wasteful pockets. As for Cancún, during that last 20 years, it expanded international tourism to the entire Mexican Caribbean coastline, which has seen its local population severed from its native lands, and submerged into money-based transactional relationships.

¹See Ramón Vera and Samuel Rosado’s article: Ojarasca
This is seen as development by many of the "Mayan" Train promoters, especially Rogelio Jimenez Pons, current head of FONATUR, who has repeated the same half baked narrative as orthodox economics. In response to environmental activist’s concerns about destroying Mexico’s most preserved jaguar sanctuary located in the peninsula, he publicly claimed that balance between "starving children" and "fat jaguars" should be achieved, as though the current state of malnutrition and child obesity in Mexico was not promoted by urbanization, industrialization and an aspiration to be like American tourists. This statement illustrates how deeply rooted neoclassical economics is in political rhetoric; furthermore, it exhibits how Mexican authorities linked with corporations constantly downplay the impacts of their actions and undermine people’s concerns.

However, his cynical response is not a result of ignorance but of blatant disregard of people’s rights and actual sustainability. Before Lopez Obrador, former president Enrique Peña Nieto had launched a Special Economic Zones (SEZ) project, which offered a glimpse of investors’ plan of regional integration. The overarching project sought to connect the Yucatan Peninsula and the Tehuantepec Isthmus with the Gulf of Mexico.

The project was expected to build several SEZ across the country that would host industrial complexes within them, where federal, state and local taxes would be waived for investors, security privatized and workers’ rights eroded. However, deregulation was only one side of the project, as it established a geopolitical unit that connected the Isthmus, Mexico’s shortest path between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, with the Peninsula, which along with Cuba and the state of Florida encloses the Gulf of Mexico from unwanted access, and expands American control on international trade.

The "Mayan" Train cannot be understood without placing it in a larger economic strategy. Even as Peña Nieto’s SEZ were terminated by Lopez Obrador, the project was only transformed and assimilated within the ‘Mayan’ Train’s objectives. As shown in map 2, SEZ number 1 (Coatzacoalcos) and 6 (Salina Cruz) are located at each of the Isthmus’ extremes. Both, known for their longstanding oil related activities, are connected via an old railway envisioned during Benito Juarez’s presidential term. Before the Panama Canal was even considered as the narrowest path between oceans, the Isthmus was already being proposed as a viable option to transfer commodities from one ocean to another without compromising or leaving the Gulf of Mexico.

The Trans-isthmic Train, one of Lopez Obrador’s four major industrial projects, is expected to modernize the existing railways between Coatzacoalcos and Salina Cruz (points 1 and 6 respectively) by installing dozens of major industrial complexes and newer infrastructure. In fact, all SEZ enclose what Barreda called Mexico’s greater Tehuantepec Isthmus, an enormous regional project that dates back decades, and which was thrust into a full fledge economic integration project during the Zedillo administration. Twenty years ago, Barreda2 predicted a system of railways, pipelines, highways and other so called network infrastructure would be built in this region to fully integrate it to the Gulf of Mexico in order to fit US’s interests.

This region directly connects with Central America, allowing for a cheap labor catchment area filled with both migrants and locals. Furthermore, Mexican workers earn the lowest wages among OECD countries, and politicians have advertised this as an advantage for investors and as a contradictory talking point by stating to voters at home the need for better jobs and wages while boasting Mexico’s best "comparative advantage" abroad. Barreda, emphasized that this region is of utmost geopolitical, military and economic importance. Since the sixteenth century over 50 attempts at interconnecting both oceans by means of major corridors in the Tehuantepec Isthmus have been made, and so far, are now coming to fruition for international investors. In his research, he

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came across a consulting firm hired by the Mexican government in the mid 90’s to design such a corridor; it proposed a "global manufacturing and distribution hub", taking advantage of oil in the Gulf of Mexico, manufacturing, fertile land, cheap labor, and vast amounts of fresh underground water.

Barreda, also predicted the wind energy frenzy in the Isthmus, an immense depression between three mountain ranges, two of which span across Mexico on the one side, and Guatemala on the other, that acts as an exhaust valve between atmospheric pressure changes in both oceans. The Isthmus, located primarily in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, in turn, has seen the valley covered by wind turbines and immersed in conflict, as the Zapoteca people of Oaxaca have opposed both government authorities and investors taking over land, resources via land grabbing, extortion, bribery, etc. If we see the region as the Greater Tehuantepec Isthmus, proposed by Barreda, it is no wonder why "clean" energy corporations have mostly settled in predominantly indigenous communities in Yucatan and Oaxaca. Wind is not the only energy greenwashed and promoted ad nauseam in the region; hydroelectric power has always been a key ‘renewable’ energy source in Mexico because of its unique orography. Chiapas and Tabasco, states with the highest annual precipitation, spring vast amounts of potentially exploitable rivers, coveted among energy sector giants. With Lopez Obrador’s administration a perverse combination of renewable and fossil fuel energy has taken place, and several large energy projects, such as ‘Dos Bocas’ refinery, and several gas-powered plants are being built, two of which are located in the cities of Merida and Valladolid.

Paraphrasing Barreda’s work, regional in-
tegration in the Peninsula meant developing supply chains by establishing highly competitive but complimentary corporations, as those imposed in southeast Asia. Therefore, the SEZ project, inspired in the Asian Tigers and countries subdued to their economic influence, sought to harness this regional project. As stated earlier, Lopez Obrador’s populist and nationalistic vision had to compromise with powerful interests embodied by Ernesto Zedillo who had managed to appoint people akin to his political and economic vision to key positions in the federal government. Nevertheless, they themselves had to yield some power over to Lopez Obrador; therefore, while big international firms were to build the “Mayan” Train, a government owned fund, not even a ministry, would operate it; the SEZ would be transformed into a new corridor managed by the Mexican government in an attempt to rescue PEMEX from financial bankruptcy and partially regain authority over key geopolitical and energy resources.

Campeche’s SEZ (number 3), would have clustered agroindustrial and local small scale farming produce as stated in SEZ documentation. Campeche has experienced a radical change in its rural landscape, as corporations have managed to get their hands on farmlands for GMO soybeans, corn and other agroindustrial crops, such as African Palm. This was advertised as a key comparative advantage in international markets. Lastly, the remaining SEZ number 4 is located close to the port of Progreso in the state of Yucatán, it was meant to connect the aspiring keystone city of Merida to international markets. The city is even projected to be the “Mayan” Train’s headquarters, and is being proposed as the “capital of the Mayan world” by FONATUR bureaucrats, despite being a white-city stronghold.

When looked at in this way, the “Mayan” and Trans-isthmic trains are merely reshaping these projects in accordance to compromise and a long lasting intention of building an overarching regional economy in the Gulf of Mexico. Even as a result of a negotiation, the “Mayan” Train poses an enormous risk to underground water sources, Mayan and urban communities, and generations to come. In March 2020, a technical document was published by Mexico’s Ministry of Environment (SEMARNAT) regarding the Mayan Train’s route. The document projected a route spanning from the state of Tabasco to Yucatán, and it would go through the only natural reserve in the city of Mérida, currently being claimed and disputed by real estate and construction companies. This signaled a renewed intention to land grab potential urban ground for a sprawling city. However, even as politicians stated the reserve was a deteriorating piece of land, Cuxtal is responsible for providing drinking water to over 200 thousand people living within the Merida-1 water system network, including most public hospitals and ironically most hotels.

This wasn’t the only concern that arose from such a document. Despite Lopez Obrador’s adamant opposition to government corruption, FONATUR had awarded 58% of its public bidding budget to itself via a subsidiary called ‘FONATUR Infraestructura’ and granted construction rights to several companies involved in scandalous corruption schemes such as ICA—involved in building overpriced trains and highways in Mexico City’s area of influence—, the Mexican army—involved in several human rights violations, including the disappearance of 43 students in 2014—, and Blackrock—a company involved in corruption schemes worldwide and linked to oil and industrial-military money. Many countries were swift to bid—and more precisely negotiate—their right to build a piece of the “Mayan” Train; some linked to Chinese and Mexican capital, American corporations and none with a vision of social justice for coming generations and indigenous people.

In Mérida alone dozens of projects are being revived by FONATUR’s train, even as its PR branch has tried to portray the project as one for and by the people. In fact, they have constantly accused the opposition of being affluent and right wing, while spending millions of pesos on golf courses, hotels, fancy beverages, and accommodating affluent tourists’ needs.
The "Mayan" Train mirrors other neoliberal projects not by sheer mistake or coincidence but because it is —by design— neoliberal. In other words, it enables corporations to take over land and public resources to boost profits, downplays the importance of indigenous and rural culture, and gears infrastructure to provide tourists and export-driven manufacturing and oil industries a way into the global economy by means of exploiting local territories.

Merida has seen its urban landscape sprawl into rural communities with densely packed dwellings, no green and recreational areas, and only accessible by main avenues with restrictive and captive infrastructure such as shopping malls, auto retail shops, and real estate businesses. In fact, urban expansion is mostly the result of expanding infrastructure, manufacturing facilities and an ever growing army of under and unemployed workers. Projects that had been long forgotten or had been deemed whimsical, have been revived by either FONATUR or investors who eagerly welcome the "Mayan" Train. As mentioned earlier, most projects were not devised by the current administration, but had been compromised and thought out as part of a regional integration plan of the Greater Isthmus. A previous attempt to build a train had been carried out nearly 10 years before, and with it a network of highways, beltways that surrounded Merida and projected its east and northbound expansion.

Such a plan was envisioned 20 years ago, when Ciudad Caucel was erected within the small neighboring village of Caucel. Shopping malls, highways and industrial corridors ensued, and the city of Merida crept over small rural communities towards Hunucmá, also a small mostly rural community east of Mérida.
The city has expanded rapidly towards Progreso and will continue to do so as investors’ interests take over city planning and expansion as they see fit. As industries settled in the region, waste built up with both urban and industrial residue. Landfills soon rose as small hills in the plains of the Peninsula and water became polluted with manure and toxic waste as livestock farms leached residue and industries pumped their wastewater into the aquifer. As reported by the ‘Modelo’ brewery’s Environmental Impact Report (MIA in Spanish), wastewater is injected into the aquifer, expecting extremely complex underground water flows to magically flush it out into the Gulf of Mexico.

As the city of Merida expanded outwards, people from disenfranchised rural communities came looking for better working wages, only to find themselves trapped within the urban way of life: no means of production nor land, and forced to live off of declining wages. As Marx had predicted more than a century ago, as production of wealth increases, misery does as well. FONATUR has boasted many times that the project includes development ‘hubs’ for each station —‘polos de desarrollo’ as it was named in Spanish. These hubs made FONATUR’s plans clear, as it intended to urbanize and bring "aesthetics" –as stated in one official document– and development to underdeveloped Mayan communities. Even as these projects were praised by bureaucrats as the most relevant part of the project, they were de-
Map 6: Merida’s urban sprawl in 2000

Map 7: Merida’s urban sprawl in 2020
liberately obscured and withdrawn from most public documents.

FONATUR’s development hubs remain hidden in a handful of technical documents and state its plans to urbanize these local communities to enhance places for tourism both aesthetically and logistically, claiming that spread out urbanization was better than a Cancún-style sprawl. This, however, was proven wrong when the ancient Mayan city of Chichen Itza was named a ‘Wonder of the World’, neighboring towns such as Písté and Dzitás, instead of reducing illegal logging according to neoclassical economics’ logic, it increased and waste accumulated. Orthodox economics would hold that just by raising wages in ostensibly “eco-friendly” activities, people would be incentivized to abandon environmentally destructive jobs; however, this logic fails to consider that “legal” logging is still carried out by urban developers, tourism, infrastructure construction, and that doing something “legal” does not imply social justice, sustainability, accessibility, affordability and let alone necessity. Furthermore, it fails to ever consider cultural and grassroots processes that have claimed other ways of organizing and relating to nature and communities.

As of December 2020, Amazon and Walmart are set to establish logistics warehouses in the neighboring town of Uman, and several projects have been reactivated in the region, including highways connecting the Uman-Merida-Hunucma industrial corridor (n. 14, map 4) to the port of Progreso; a new airport which will be potentially built near the Cuxtal reserve; solar and wind energy infrastructure; among many other projects. Even after Lopez Obrador dissolved most trust funds in an attempt to control corruption, FONATUR is creating them to protect the secrecy of their projects, including Cuxtal’s recent incorporation to FONATUR’s grasp. All government agencies have gotten behind and aligned to the “Mayan” Train, conceding their executive power by means of shady negotiations and policies. Disguised as a populist project, the “Mayan” Train has remained well seen in the eyes of public opinion and critics have been pointed out as emotional, right wing and lacking journalistic criteria.

During this time, important research organizations such as PODER group in Mexico have carried out investigations regarding FONATUR’s shady business deals and have published a website to inform people about the risks. As with other news organizations, the FONATUR has lashed back at PODER by only responding to certain claims while leaving PODER’s most relevant findings and questionings deliberately unanswered. Although other media outlets are aligned to right wing interests and have been rightly called out by FONATUR’s communication team and other independent journalists, all critics are placed within the same right wing opposition. This has had decimating effects on freedom of speech and public opinion, which seldom knows the difference between ad hominem statements and real journalistic work and integrity. FONATUR has repeatedly tried to undermine journalists such as Ricardo Balderas, whose investigations have uncovered corruption, shady deals and the urbanizing intentions of the “Mayan” Train.

PODER has answered back to FONATUR’s communication team’s claims and stood behind their journalists’ integrity. This tactic has been common in Mexico’s official communication teams and has taken a new form by ignoring concerns of Mayan people, organizations, scientists and academics. The project uses a populist rhetoric to support its neoliberal intentions of urbanizing, dispossession, and economic integration. People have been displaced from their homes, water security has been threatened and big corporations are finally getting a piece of the Peninsula.

The Ministry of Environment has approved the “Mayan” Train’s Environmental Impact Report only with minor remarks regarding wildlife while deliberately ignoring the project’s undeniable impact over underground water quality and availability, deforestation, urban sprawling, loss of ancestral knowledge, and others. People who have been displaced from their homes, water security has been threatened and big corporations are getting a piece of the Peninsula.

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1 https://trenmaya.poderlatam.org/
projected underground tunnels in Merida — which would impact aquifers in the region —, urban hubs, soil degradation, industrial pollution, waste management, among many other problems that have been pointed out by multiple organizations, academics and Mayan communities.

The project is neoliberal at its core. It seeks to organize production outwards and connect sectors that have deepened inequalities and discrimination. In the midst of a climate, social, economic, cultural and environmental crisis, negotiating geopolitical control of the Greater Isthmus without placing people’s cultural and ancestral needs first will only guarantee miserable living conditions for working class people, Mayans, and generations to come. As with other projects, short term profit outweighs any concern or consideration for a sustainable future. If people, urban and rural alike, do not have a claim over their land, city, and right to know, any statement offered by the government will be meaningless.

Even as this project is clearly a negotiation with big corporate interests, Mexican government has decided to hide its intentions under the banner of fairness, justice and economic equality, instead of creating mechanisms to strengthen people’s involvement and direct participation in political, urban and rural affairs. A more just future will begin when governments and capital alike change the condescending approach to spearhead their interests and start including people by long term education campaigns that considers and is built on top of ancestral and local knowledge. Pretending that by merely creating underpaying jobs all other problems ensued by the projects will be magically erased is irresponsible and an attitude that has led to many injustices and sacrifice zones. We can let the government continue with the project and its rhetoric or we can begin pushing for a future where people and not capital decides.
REFERENCES


